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Beijing doctor alleges SARS cases cover-up in China

Beijing's mayor Meng Xuenong reportedly said this week that the first case of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) was detected in the capital 6 weeks ago. This admission refutes official claims that the deadly virus was found there only recently.

According to the *China Daily* newspaper, Meng said the first SARS patient was treated in a Beijing hospital on March 1 but had now recovered.

Meng's remark appears to confirm claims by a doctor from one of the city's hospitals that Beijing authorities knew about the SARS outbreak earlier than officially acknowledged.

Jiang Yanyong of the People's Liberation Army General Hospital, known as Hospital 301, claimed that at one Beijing hospital alone, more than 60 SARS patients had been admitted and at

least seven had died.

Jiang made the claims in a signed statement provided to *Time* magazine. The statement said that two People's Liberation Army hospitals were now treating SARS patients—hospitals 309 and 302—and Hospital 309 is "already full to capacity". The Ministry of Health, in a statement released on April 15, said that Beijing had just 37 SARS patients.

Jiang said that he went public with his claims because he feared that "a failure to disclose accurate statistics about the illness will only lead to more deaths".

He said he "could not believe" statements made by China's Health Minister Zhang Wenkang that Beijing

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WHO investigators recently allowed into China to investigate SARS

had only 12 SARS cases and that three patients had died. "As a doctor who cares about people's lives and health, I have a responsibility to aid

international and local efforts to prevent the spread of SARS", he said.

Mary Ann Benitez

NEWS IN BRIEF

Global update on SARS cases

3169 cases of SARS and 144 deaths have been reported in 21 countries, as of April 14. Three countries—Indonesia, the Philippines, and Sweden—were added to the list of countries affected. China, with 1418 cases and 64 deaths, is still the most seriously affected area. Hong Kong, with 1190 cases and 47 deaths, is the second most seriously affected area. Three of the recent deaths in Hong Kong were in persons younger than 50 years, raising concerns among health officials that the virus may have mutated, since most of the deaths so far have been in elderly people or in patients with pre-existing diseases.

Test for SARS virus developed

A German biotechnology company has produced a commercial test for the SARS virus. The company, Artus, which is based in Hamburg, is distributing the test free of charge to specialist laboratories around the world. Artus says the test can confirm the

presence of the coronavirus that is widely believed to cause SARS. The test can detect the virus in throat swabs, saliva, and faeces, and produces a result in just 2 hours, whereas current antibody tests take at least 10 days. The

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company says it is confident that the test will be able to identify the virus, and that it will begin to charge laboratories for the test after more thorough evaluation has been done.

SARS virus sequenced

A Canadian and US laboratory have independently sequenced the genome of the virus believed to cause SARS. On April 12, researchers at the Michael Smith Genome Sciences Centre in Vancouver, Canada, announced they had mapped the genome of a sample of coronavirus taken from a patient who died from SARS in Canada. 2 days later, the CDC (Atlanta, GA) completed their sequencing of the coronavirus from an Asian SARS patient. Officials from both laboratories said the two sequences were identical except for a small difference which may turn out to be "common sequence errors". According to the CDC, the genome of the SARS coronavirus is 29 727 nucleotides long, and the genome organisation is similar to that of other coronaviruses.